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ABSTRACT

The parent-teacher conference offers an opportunity to improve communication between home and school. In addition, it is an ideal time for discussing how the home environment can compliment and reinforce the work accomplished at school. Thus, when parents ask what they can do at home to help, the teacher can respond with specific suggestions for extending the learning process. Suggestions can include ideas to encourage children to (1) listen, (2) read, (3) participate in activities outside the classroom, (4) ask questions, (5) develop an interest in current events, (6) instruct others, (7) take notes, and (8) communicate with parents about what is happening at school on a daily basis. Parental involvement in the learning process is necessary to meet the needs of the child, and communication between home and school should be an ongoing process. (PCB)

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# THE PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCE:

# DEVELOPING CURRICULUM IN THE HOME

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THE PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCE:

DEVELOPING CURRICULUM IN THE HOME

Despite federal attempts, the tradition of local involvement in education remains strong in the United States. Most citizens, regardless of whether they have children or not, are quite aware of the status of education in this country. Kept alive has been the belief that we, the citizens, have a right to be involved in public education, whether we choose to exercise that right or not.

This feeling of a legal and moral right to participate has kept parents closely involved in education. They maintain their right to criticize curricula, policy, teaching methods and just about everything else that schools represent. While criticism is unnerving to many educators who seldom see it as justified, it is needed to keep education effective as an agency of democracy. Equally important is this active involvement of parents (Becker and Epstein, 1982). It ensures a balance, a stability, a compromise between educational goals and political, social and economic reality.

This involvement is disconcerting for a number of teachers. Many wish parents would leave education to the professionals. Teachers feel they know best what should be taught and how it should be taught. They see parental involvement as a hindrance to their efforts, a nuisance that cuts deeply into their time and energy.

Other teachers, however, see parental involvement differently. They realize it takes time, interferes with schedules and diminishes efficiency, but these same teachers have learned that small investments of time can pay huge dividends. Teachers know they can rally parents to their side and count on them for support and help. They know that simply having parental support of their efforts will forestall many of the battles they would normally expect to encounter with students. Those teachers will tell you that it is worth the time and effort to foster parental involvement and that the earlier this bond is established, the better (Collins, 1981).

Help from parents should always be appreciated by teachers. Most parents are more than willing to support the teacher's efforts with their child at home (Walberg, 1984). They will seldom ask to help, especially as their children progress beyond the primary grades, but that does not mean they have lost interest. Parents will usually collaborate with teachers if teachers ask for the parents help. Parents have an investment in the education of their child and they will do what they can (Schultz, 1981). Parents need, however, to be asked, and they need to be instructed about how they can help.

There is a vast deposit of parental support and help available to teachers that is locked up by ignorance, insecurity, timidity, apathy and a hands-off approach to

education. The key that opens that lock is communication, and that communication must first come from the teacher. Those teachers who are successful work at involving the parent in their child's schoolwork (United States Department of Education, 1986). One such vehicle for establishing this parental involvement is the parent-teacher conference.

The parent-teacher conference, when compared to other forms of parent-teacher interaction, offers an opportunity for a significantly more meaningful exchange. This direct, personal contact is the most effective way to improve communication between school and home (Cattermole and Robinson, 1985). However, if not properly managed the parent-teacher conference may only serve to reinforce the gap that exists between home and school. The success or failure of the conference rests with the teacher. Parents entering the school are nervous, apprehensive, wondering what is going to happen. It is the teacher's responsibility to put parents at ease, to set a positive, friendly, businesslike tone for the conference. This can best be achieved by identifying and coordinating the concerns of all the people involved.

The parent-teacher conference is the ideal opportunity for both parties to exchange observations and feelings about the education the child is receiving. By explaining the rationale behind assignments, testing, evaluation, etc.,

the teacher is providing the parent with valuable information regarding the in-school educational process. By encouraging the parent to talk, the teacher is able to solicit information about the student's activities outside the classroom, and more importantly, in the home. The goal for the teacher is to take this information and use it in such a manner as to demonstrate confirmation of the parent's concerns. The teacher must show that the school and the home are not mutually exclusive environments and that both teacher and parent want the best possible education for the child. It is in the teacher's best interest to encourage parents "to value their own unique capacity to play a significant role alongside the school as active participants in their children's education" (Friedman, 1980, p. 26).

In addition to providing the parent with feedback about their child's in-school performance, the parent-teacher conference is also an ideal time for discussing how the home environment can compliment and reinforce the work accomplished at school. There is considerable evidence of the importance of the home as a learning environment and the need for the home and school to work together (Rich, 1985). Although various individuals in and surrounding the home have impact on a child's learning, particularly influential in preparing a child for success in school are his/her parents. With the demonstrated importance of the home

as a learning environment the question becomes, How best can the parent provide those learning opportunities at home?

First, it is important to note that curriculum does not only reside in the classroom; the home is quite integral. While some research indicates the apparent value of involving parents in curriculum development (Hass, 1980; Pratt, 1980), a need still exists to focus on what parents can do to enhance the communication skills that are being taught to their child in the classroom. Developing and improving the speech and language arts curricula in schools is obviously a worthwhile concern of many academicians. Yet, if such development and improvement only takes place in the school, then education of the child, the most valuable commodity in the school, is significantly shortchanged.

It should also be emphasized that the authors of this essay merely offer the following as representative; the examples below are neither definitive nor exhaustive. Moreover, these examples provide practical applications of how parents can have greater input into their child's learning process. Although many teachers incorporate the importance of the following into the classroom, the process cannot stop there. Communication between home and school should be an ongoing process, one that just does not occur at conference time. Parents must extend that process at home. Thus, when a parent asks at a parent-teacher conference

what he/she can do at home to help, the authors suggest responding with the following approach to LEARNING.

"Does your child engage in LISTENING behaviors at home?"

Few educators would argue that being a critical listener is necessary for knowledge acquisition (Cooper, 1985). To succeed in school, children need quite sophisticated listening skills. They must be able to comprehend some complicated concepts and act in a rather rapid manner. Unfortunately, many students have inadequate listening skills. Thus parents need to stress the importance of listening in the home. Teachers need to remind parents that they (parents) can help children in improving such a vital skill. Some suggestions for parents include:

1. Designate a listening time in which all sounds of radio, television and/or stereo are turned off. This is an excellent opportunity for a child to notice all of the sounds that went unnoticed in the general activities of the home. Such efforts can result in an appreciation for the aesthetics surrounding the individuals in the home.

2. Plan family meals in which no one interrupts anyone else. This allows even the most energetic child to let the other finish what he/she has to say.

3. Stress the importance of critical listening. Parents might point out that it is important to know who is making a statement or a particular commercial, and why. Such investigation encourages the child not only to challenge the validity of events but also stresses the need to listen with a critical mind.

4. Have verbal exercises in which the child finishes such sentences with words that begin with the same sound:
   Frequently Fred:
   Sometimes Sue:
   Bears bring:

All are:
Inherent in this activity is not only the enhancement of listening skills but also the expansion of language acquisition

The above activities allow the child and parent to participate together and involves more than the traditional practices of sitting passively and absorbing others' words. As Lundsteen and Goode (1981) point out, for children it is important they "receive the highest quality experiences" (p. 61). And those listening experiences can be enhanced at home.

"Is your child encouraged to engage in EXPERIENCES outside of the classroom?"

Pedagogical figures have long recognized that students can learn through experience (Allen and Brown, 1976; Manning and Manning, 1981). In fact, "learning by doing" is sometimes an important part of classroom learning. As a student progresses through the educational system, however, there is a smaller degree of learning by doing integrated into classroom procedures. Therefore, parents need to understand the value of learning by doing and which experiences are likely to be most beneficial to the child. Additionally, experiential learning provides a basis for further learning. The more experiences children have, the larger the base of knowledge to draw upon in the future. Since classroom learning is sometimes rigid, atomistic and has little focus on student self-concept, experiential learning

becomes even more significant in the education process. For the parent, two approaches to this issue are feasible. They include:

1. Outside-of-the-classroom experiences, sometimes called "the field trip", are especially rewarding for the child. Instead of talking about the fire station, the police station or the library, parents might take the child to these places to get firsthand experience of each. Since the school teacher is not often equipped to make regular trips outside of the classroom, parents need to recognize the natural curiosity of their children and promote such investigation.

2. Family picnics in the park, attendance at the circus and visits to the dentist all have potential for experiential learning. Parents need to talk with the child about the various elements of each environment. Consequently, motivation to learn becomes intrinsic.

Parents might instigate self-analysis after each of these experiences. Has the child learned something from the experience? He/She should be encouraged to relate that learning. Did the child relate prior personal experiences? Again, parents must stimulate such personal introspection.

Children can develop a high sense of self-esteem and personal development as they acquire information through their experiences. Yet this information assimilation takes place outside of the clasroom and learning becomes incidental to the student's experience. Above all, individuals should be "educated through a variety of experiences in a variety of settings, not merely in schools and families" (Leichter, 1980, p. 13).

"Does your child ASK questions at home? Do you ASK your child questions?"

In school a child receives an enormous amount of information. In turn, that same child is most often required to remember that information. However, children should be habituated to purposeful investigation rather than a mass acquisition of information. Yet these children need to determine what a question really means; that is, determine what response the questioner really wants. Of course, parents play a major role in the question-asking and answering process (Illinois State Board of Education, 1981). Their involvement may be depicted in the following suggestions:

1. If a child asks a question, parents should not "brush off" the question just because it may appear ridiculous or even embarrassing. Parents should answer the question if they can or, if they cannot, they need to suggest to the child that they look up the answer together. The process should be one of togetherness.

2. Parents should not tell a child more than he/she wants to know. When answering questions, answers should be precise and concise.

3. Assertiveness in the question-asking process should be encouraged. Children need to continually develop initiative in the questioning process. If there are questions following a family discussion, the child should state those questions with confidence. During dinner their child might be asked about events that occurred at school. In turn, the child may even ask about the parents' day at work/home.

It is imperative that parents, when confronted with an inquisitive child, respond to their child's curiosity through whatever aids are available. In fact, parents need to continually reinforce that curiosity through stimulation and

conscious effort.

"Other than homework from school, does your child READ in the home?"

When a child really discovers how to read, most inevitably he/she will want to learn to read more. Moreover, the child gets a good sense that he/she is "somebody" with a unique ability. Indeed, reading is quite important in the learning process. As Baron, Baron and MacDonald (1983) noted, "the most important skill taught in formal education is reading" (p. 53). However such an accomplishment is virtually impossible without the involvement of parents. In their child's early years, parents should consider reading to their child for as Baron, Baron and MacDonald (1983) stated, "the home environment has an effect on a child's attitude and motivation for reading" (p. 84). It is in the home that lessons of concentration are learned. Yet as the child grows older, more reading involvement between parent and child must occur. Although schools have long acknowledged the value of reading in the classroom, the home must also be integral in that reading process. Children need to see their parents read; this provides a terrific model for the child to follow. Without much argument then, parental involvement in reading is important (The National Institute of Education, 1984). More specifically, then, parents might attempt to integrate

the following into their homes to improve upon the school's efforts in teaching reading:

1. Library visits--introduce the child to the library. Show him/her where the dinosaur, pet, and hobby books are. Take the child there regularly.

2. Personal everday involvement--provide opportunities to use reading, i. e. let the child read the instructions to a game, a recipe, road signs, etc.

3. Home library--including magazines, paperbacks, reference materials, scrapbooks--all which whet the child's appetite for reading.

4. Set aside a regular reading time. In a busy day, parents might find some time to read to the child or to have the child read to the parent. Perhaps just before bed when all are relaxed would be most convenient.

Whatever is employed at home, parents need to continue the reading process that is occurring at school. One of the most important aspects of a parent role in reading process is to be attentive, supportive and responsive. Reading at home can be an exciting time for both the parent and child. It is important, however, to share in that excitement.

"Is your child up-to-date with the NEWS? Is television a help or a hinderance at home?"

Perhaps one of the most valuable assets parents have in their home is the television. All too often, however, television is depicted as unrealistic, absurd, and a negative force (Sprung, 1975). Yet with appropriate parental involvement, the television can be a beneficial pedagogical tool. Indeed, some researchers acknowledge television as a

news supplement (Illinois State Board of Education, 1981). And that is what it should be--a supplement. The University of Michigan Institute for Social Research reported that the average amount of time that a working mother and father spend each day reading, talking, or playing with their children is 13 minutes. The average number of minutes that a working mother and father spend with their child and a television set is 133 minutes. Thus, the home television should not be the primary motivator for the education of a child (Wall Street Journal, 1986). Parents can be providers of this resource by practicing the following:

1. Watch television with the child. Parents need to share viewing time and discuss programs with the child, i. e. asking a child's opinions and having the child ask the parent's opinions; discuss the child's impressions, etc.

2. Do not let the television become the habit; make it a supplement, particularly in understanding the news. What is important is that discriminate viewing take place.

3. Set a good example in personal television viewing--parents should be cautious of overwatching television.

4. Develop learning using the television--if a child is in a social studies class, for example, make it a point to use the news to discuss geographic locations. If a child is studying the qualifications of a political candidate, parents might use television to indicate an individual who holds that particular political office. A parent might even want to surround the television with various reference materials such as a globe, atlas, or a map.

Parents can help teach their child current events and other social studies through one of the most activating forces available: television. Surely teachers provide specific factual information in the classroom. But to complete

that learning process parents need to accept some responsibility for teaching at home through what available means they have. One powerful teacher of living history is the television.

"Does your child INSTRUCT others at home"?

Students tutoring other students can lead to improved academic achievement for both student and tutor as well as increasing a positive attitude toward coursework (United States Department of Education, 1986). A child's ability to instruct another person allows the child to identify his/her strengths and weaknesses. While the teacher may promote such interaction between students at school, parents must assume the responsibility for providing the encouragement during the child's daily activities. These activities/suggestions for parents include:

1. Stress the importance of leadership behaviors to the child. For instance, if a child knows how to play a particular game, parents should allow that child to instruct the other children on the specifics of the game.

2. Neither discourage nor belittle the child's instruction. If the child desires to teach what the parent may assume to be a simple task, the child should be permitted to perform that activity. By allowing the child to take part in those instruction sessions, the parent is helping to promote a positive self-image within the child. Such positive self-regard is essential for effective classroom learning (Cohen, Kulik and Kulik, 1982).

3. Coordinate and develop peer activities. Such participation between a child and his/her peers can lead to acquired respect and positive peer relations for the individual initiating such instructional practices.

Most children play with other children. With this understanding in mind, parents should recognize a need for their child to engage in situations with other children. Those experiences can be both enjoyable and educational for the child if he/she approaches the experience with an interest and ability to help in the instructional process. Moreover valuable speech habits may develop, helping the child to use the correct words and phrases and to learn new ones.

"Does NOTETAKING take place in the home?"

More often than not, "children want to write" (Graves, 1983, p. 3). And it is no surprise that one may remember more by writing it down. Unfortunately, however, such notetaking is many times taken for granted. In the home, parents have a responsibility to assist their child in the development of his/her notetaking skills. Conscious efforts on the part of the parent is important to indicate the thoroughness of a child's listening/selection process. Parents can promote this in several ways by suggesting the following:

1. When a child answers the phone at home, he/she should write down any pertinent information. This will, in turn, help to guarantee accuracy in the transference of messages. A child should also write down any job responsibilities he/she has at home. Grocery and shopping lists and appointments also need to be noted so a child (and parent) has a record for future use.

2. Designate periodic "writing times" in the home. These writing times can simply be a letter to a friend or as complex as sending for information from a governmental agency. What is important to remember for the parent

is that these episodes should not be too much like school work. Many children may be turned off to writing if parents handle this activity incorrectly.

3. Another method of notetaking at home relates directly to the reading homework of the child. As he/she is reading, notes can be written down (in outline form). This not only encourages a child's critical thinking skills, but allows the child to organize his/her reading.

Although such notetaking is not necessarily appropriate in all reading situations (i.e. short passages, graphs, charts, etc.), such writing can assist the child in remembering facts, increasing interest in subject matter, and making study more efficient. Moreover, notetaking at home can increase a child's notetaking competency at school.

"Are GRADES your sole concern with the progress of your child?"

One of the most controversial issues surrounding our educational system is the report card; How is Johnny doing? Yet too much emphasis is placed on that piece of paper and with ever increasing tension, Johnny is fearful of his parents seeing his report card and his parents are apprehensive in Johnny's report. Educators need to reemphasize to the parents that their child's report card is not the last day of judgment. The child takes home a report card everyday. Parents need to be aware of "everyday report cards" and not regard that slip of paper as the final product. If, for instance, a child comes home in a depressed manner, parents should be able to deduce something is wrong

and might consider that child's experiences in school that day. Or, does that child show eagerness in showing his parents some fine leather work done in hobby corner at school? Parents certainly need to show their child that they regard that report card as an important guide to school progress, but there are other "reports" that matter too--others such as those discussed above. Perhaps parents have the most difficult of all lessons to learn: to accept the child as he/she is, and assist him/her to his/her own full potential.

It cannot be stressed enough that parental involvement in the learning process is necessary to meet the needs of the child. However, such involvement must be more than attending periodic parent-teacher conferences and asking how the child is doing in school. Parents need to understand, and teachers need to reitterate, that "the parent is the most important teacher a child will ever have" (Rich, Van Dien, and Mattox, 1979, p. 33).

While curriculum improvement in the schools has occurred quite frequently in recent years (Doll, 1982), unfortunately, the home environment is sometimes ignored as influential in a child's learning. Perhaps educators need to recognize that influence and while curricula continues to improve, the integration of the above communication skills at home must be considered to ensure the child the best in his/her education. Parents must supplement and

reinforce the development of communication skills learned at school with active support and participation at home. Communication between home and school should be an ongoing process. This combined effort develops a speech and language arts curriculum to its fullest and includes all appropriate individuals involved in the development--educators, parents and children. As Ebersole (1979) noted, "the ring of respect encircling students, teachers and parents is an essential relationship for effective learning. A break anywhere in the circle results in a breakdown in student performance" (p. v).

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